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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	4
FREEDOM AT CORINTH: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN PAUL THE APOSTLE AND LUCIAN, A CORINTHIAN CHRISTIAN Allan McNicol and James Thompson	5
THE DISCIPLINE OF FREEDOM Michael R. Weed	19
“THE DISCIPLINE OF FREEDOM”: A RESPONSE Paul L. Watson	28
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY: THE ESSENCE OF A SERMON Tony Ash	32
BOOK REVIEW: <u>Paul’s Ethic of Freedom</u> by Peter Richardson Don Crittenden	39
CONTRIBUTORS	44

FOREWORD

Since the dawn of history, the human odyssey has in large part been a quest for freedom. In this respect the present age is no different. With varying degrees of success, we continue to explore diverse models of freedom -- political, psychological, religious, and economic.

In the first century the Christian message encountered and joined issue with alternative views of freedom. It is equally important that Christians today join in the ongoing conversation regarding the nature and significance of human freedom.

These essays, originally presented in a seminar conducted with the Administrative Board of the Institute for Christian Studies, are here made available to a wider audience as an expression of the Institute's commitment to the task of encouraging reflection on the implications of Christian faith for life.

I would like to thank my colleagues on the faculty of the Institute for their patience and cooperation in this task. Special recognition and thanks are also due to Mrs. Frances Horn, Institute Secretary, and Ms. Kathryn Pinkerton for their valuable aid in preparing the manuscript for printing.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

FREEDOM AT CORINTH

A Conversation between Paul the Apostle and Lucian,
a Corinthian Christian

By Allan McNicol and James Thompson

Lucian (James Thompson):

As a native of Corinth and a Hellenist in my cultural background, I find myself in the very happy situation of saying that I've found in Jesus Christ what my entire cultural heritage has tried to offer. There is no more precious word for us in our heritage than the word "freedom." We have in our past the heroic stories of the men who gave their lives for the freedom of our Greek people. As a child, I learned in school about those who gave their lives to protect us from the Persians coming from the East. Thus freedom is a very precious word to all of us in the Greek tradition. Consequently, I have a special appreciation for the freedom I have found in Jesus Christ.

Of all people, we Greeks know what freedom is all about. If I were to define the word "freedom," I would say that freedom means not being someone else's slave. Freedom means doing what I want to do, going where I want to go, and not being bound by obligations to institutions and to others. To be free is to be my own master, to control my own destiny and to determine my own outcome as a human being. To be free is to control

my life and not to allow others to control my fate.

As many of you know, we Greeks have in our history the most noble political experiment in human rights that the world has ever known. There was a time when we had a democracy; and under that democracy, there were rights for all free citizens. Those rights insured to us by the common laws that we had the right to speak and to act and to go where we wanted to go. Under our constitution, our rights were protected and our laws gave us the structure of our freedom. Unfortunately, our experiment did not last.

No one knew more about freedom than our philosophers. On the street corners, I used to hear the teachers talk about freedom. I heard stories about the oracle at Delphi where we would go to get messages from the gods. One important slogan that we knew from the Oracle from Delphi was “Know yourself.” Thus we knew that to be free was to be in touch with ourselves and to develop our full human potential. How very appreciative I am of the great teacher, Socrates, who told us to develop our own potential and who taught us that we must examine our own lives and discover that man is the measure of all things. But I owe more gratitude to my Stoic teachers than to anyone else, because they taught me that within my own self there is a divine spark. There is a bit of the divine reason that permeates the universe. Those Stoic teachers taught me that because I am in touch with God, I can transcend all of the rules and obligations that others feel duty-bound to follow.

It is a very liberating experience to rise above and transcend those things that enslave us. They taught me that above all, I should abhor enslavement by other people. Indeed, I learned to shun anything which might enslave me. Because I do not want to be enslaved by

possessions, I do without those things in order to be free for myself. Or if there are other people, laws, or institutions that are going to enslave me, I back away from them, because the freedom to develop my own potential is more important than any of them. I especially appreciate the fact that the Stoics taught me that if I want to be free, I must realize that some rules, obligations, laws and institutions are very petty and indifferent. The laws of family and marriage as well as the laws of a city can be very limiting. I must rise above those things in order to develop my full freedom, because if I am going to be free, I can't be enslaved by other people, cities, or institutions.

As a Corinthian who has come to Christianity, I want to give full credit to Paul. It is Paul who taught me that what I was really looking for is found in Jesus Christ. Paul taught us that if anyone is in Christ, he lives in a whole new world. I learned from Paul that because the new age has come and because I have been baptized into Jesus Christ, I am above all of the laws and institutions that hold people captive. I am thankful that Paul taught us that we can reign with Jesus Christ, and that indeed those of us who have been born into him are already reigning with Jesus Christ. That is a liberating word!

I appreciate especially the fact that I have been taught by Paul that I have been saved apart from law. And if I am saved from the law--saved without the obedience to the law--then I know that Paul would never tell me that, having been saved apart from the law, I must go back to the obedience to rules and regulations. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. He is reigning with Christ. This fact suggests that we are saved without the law. Certainly Paul would not make us return to rigid legislation, for that would take away our

freedom.

Before I met Jesus Christ, I knew that freedom was achieved through developing the inner self. The most important thing for me was to develop my human potential and to see my rights; those rights I found in Jesus Christ. I found that, because I had been baptized into a personal relationship with him, I now have the opportunity to realize my potential. Long ago, I was taught that there is a bit of the divinity, a bit of the divine spark that lets us rise above customs and traditions. Paul has taught me the name of the spark; it is Jesus Christ. Jesus allows me to be really free. Having seen all of this, how very indifferent, how very petty, how very insignificant are all the laws and rules that some immature Christians would lay upon me! And trivial are the laws of family and marriage when you know that you have become free to develop yourself. Or how unimportant are those laws that have to do with what you eat or what you don't eat! We have a saying, "Food is for the belly and the belly for food." It doesn't matter--those laws and those customs are irrelevant when you have been freed up in Jesus Christ. All of the roles and customs which traditional laws have placed on us are useless burdens. All of those are petty when it comes to exercising my rights. I am grateful that Paul has taught me about my rights, because I intend to go ahead and experience my rights to the full and to develop my own human potential in order that I, along with others, can be free from the various laws and restrictions that enslave us.

Paul (Allan McNicol):

I have a good deal of sympathy with your pilgrimage, Lucian. As you know, I was

raised in Tarsus and learned thoroughly the Greek language; and I listened to a number of teachers who were associated with the great university there. They taught me much about the concept of freedom. I particularly appreciate the emphasis of some of your teachers that man bears the imprint or the spark of the divine so that he has the capacity in his own life to bear witness to and live out that divine inner freedom in his personal life. But I must point out to you that to attain equanimity, self-mastery, and above all the ability to live rationally and wisely is a difficult goal. It is only achieved by our own personal striving and power.

I think at Corinth you thought that ideal would be fulfilled among you with the acceptance of Christ. You thought that you could live on your own power, totally free, but I assert that you are still at an immature stage of life in Corinth. I cite as examples of this immaturity the appeals by you and your friends to different religious authorities, your lawsuits against one another in the Gentile courts, and above all, the lack on your part to create any sense of a common life together with your fellow believers in the Lord. It would appear that instead of arriving at this inner freedom which you love to talk about--and your spiritual equanimity--you are competitive, full of strife, puffed up with false pride, and have adopted a dangerous form of individualism where each of you at Corinth tries to do his own thing. It seems to me that some fundamental things have gone wrong with your spiritual quest. I believe you are basically confused about the fundamental difference between God and man. This in turn, I think, leads to the source of your problem in your perception of the nature of freedom.

Now I grant it may be true that when we talk about God, he in his own self as Sovereign can be seen as truly and totally free. In fact, he has demonstrated his freedom by his acceptance of you at this late time--a Gentile. But when you talk about yourself as a king--already reigning, now--you say too much. You are human; you are not divinized, not set free from the powers of this world. You are still beset by alien forces, sinful, and corruptible. You have very definite limitations even as Christians. You must, as Job of old, learn to live within your limitations. One of these limitations is that you exist in an environment where you must live with other people, your family, your neighbors, and other Christians. You cannot be indifferent to these or subordinate them for some quixotic quest to make the self free and thus be inwardly free no matter what the consequences.

You cite Jesus as the inspiration for your "freedom." But don't you know that Jesus in his life showed the opposite of what you are doing? He sought not his own so-called inner freedom to do his own thing, but the will of the other, his Father. He died in powerlessness as far as this world is concerned; but in his suffering servanthood, he showed true freedom: the freedom to give up what was his interest, his own petty self-interest, for the other. It was in this way of love, which has the capacity to suffer for the other, symbolized by the cross, that we as apostles continually live and bear witness to the essence and ultimate triumph of our God. You may seek freedom in self-fulfillment. We find it in living out this faithful way of life. Or, as I have said in a letter to you, it is fulfilling the law of Christ.

So, to be succinct, we say that one is truly free in Christ when he is free enough to

subordinate partisan self-interest for the interest of another. This is true freedom.

Now, let me mention a couple of practical matters to suggest how this principle is implemented. In our own sexual relations, we should be free to subordinate our own interests for the interest of the community. I myself have personally chosen not to be married. I am free enough to give up those beautiful benefits and joys of family life for the sake of the mission of Christ in the world and the broader community as a whole. When I talk to married people, I talk about the need in marriage for fidelity and for mutuality. The husband does not demand for his own self-interest absolute right to the body of the wife when he pleases. The same applies to the wife. But they mutually share their lives together. What one gives, the other is free to give.

And finally, in regard to this question of eating meats sacrificed to the idols: we know that there are some brethren who are offended by this practice. I counsel you as a Christian brother not to seek your own self-interest here, not to demand your inner freedom--your rights--but to be free enough to give up what seems to us to be an innocent thing to you, for the sake of the faith and integrity and Christian growth of our brothers. The way of the cross is the heart of our faith. The way of the cross is not doing our own thing; it is doing the will of our Lord, the true source of freedom.

Lucian:

Paul, I must say that I am very disappointed that one who has taught me so much is unwilling to go all the way with what he taught. For if I am not sadly mistaken, you taught

us that all things are lawful--that means that we are saved from the law. Now I hear you talking about going back to the law of Christ. How much I wish that the one who taught us about freedom would be serious about the word! But when I hear that freedom is slavery, I know that this definition is exactly what freedom is not. Freedom is being your own master and your own boss. Once one is enslaved by others, one has given up freedom. And so I see as a tragedy that you, the great teacher, will not go all the way with what you taught us.

I know quite well that you taught us once before that if anyone is in Christ, that he is a new creation--that he has arrived. Now you are telling us that we haven't arrived. It's as if we still live in that old situation before we met Jesus Christ--still with the limitations and rules that others would lay upon us. Thus I want to know from you if we have or have not become a new creation. On the one hand, I hear you telling us that we have; on the other hand, I hear you telling us that we are still living in an old world, full of rules and laws that you would have us keep and observe.

My biggest concern is this talk about limitations. It seems that I've heard all this before--but I heard it before I became a Christian. I used to hear about being under the law. You taught us that we are freed and saved apart from the law, and now you want to give back to us what you once told us was taken away. I suppose I am bothered most by your lack of consistency. Once you gave us our freedom; now you want to take it back. You want us to be enslaved by others. There is no way that that can be freedom, because freedom is the capacity to move without restrictions--to do what you want to do.

Paul:

Lucian, I want to respond to you with a couple of brief points. First of all let me say something about this whole matter of the law. It is true to say that one is free from the law. Over in Jerusalem I spoke to many of my brothers, and I said to them that in Christ we are free from the law of Moses, we are free from developing a style of life characterized by earning God's grace--what I like to refer to as the performance principle. But I do not want to be heard to say that being free from this old way of life--whereby we felt that we needed to earn God's grace by our good deeds under the laws--means that we abandon any kind of moral integrity in our lives. No, rather, what I want to say is that by looking at Christ and seeing the faithful way that he lived under the law and embodied suffering love, we now can do something we could not have done before, we now have the impetus and freedom, if you will, to do what was never possible for Jews before Christ. By the Spirit of God we can now fulfill the law's demands and so live in keeping with God's norm of righteousness.

Now, that is not of our own performance, but is by the grace of God. And so, it's as though our first partner in marriage had died; and we, instead of going off to do our own thing, have found a truly free and new way of life by being married to another partner. That partner is Christ. Certainly in Christ all things are lawful; but not all things are beneficial. You say that food is for the body and that therefore what and how we eat is inconsequential. But one cannot make the exact equation and say sexual appetites can be fulfilled in such a random fashion. No, there are moral intentions and perspectives here that make the situation quite different.

My own thought has to do with your much-wanted call for inner freedom--for the indifference to the cares of life. Here I am aware of the Stoic teachers and how they say that one can be wholly rational and bring oneself under total control. One must be so disciplined that he can find a way of inner freedom just by pursuing the most rational style of life. I wanted to say that I, too, am indifferent in some things that I count as inconsequential. I, too, believe that I have reached equanimity and inner peace, but I come to it not in reflection upon some great ideal, not from rationality, but from an understanding that God in the future is going to change the world when he sends his Son Jesus Christ. And in view of the fact that God has already claimed the world for his own through the coming of Christ--that it is going to be changed and finally work out his way--I live in the present out of the values of that future. I am indifferent to certain things not because I have attained that inner indifference, but because God has shown the future of the world for me in Christ, and I can already live in the power of this reality.

COMMENT

Thompson:

Briefly--not now as Paul and Lucian--we want to reflect over what has been said here. We have tried to represent two views of freedom. I think that one could sloganize and characterize these in a lot of different ways, but I want to come back to one issue that we disagreed over in our discussion. I had lots to say about individual inner freedom--the development of the self. And, Allan, in your first presentation you talked about freedom with others--collective freedom over against individual freedom. I wonder about the issues

that came out in American life in the 70's where we have so many kinds of "rights movements." These are movements that variously impinge on the church. I wonder if you would reflect on these two poles and note if they are pretty well constant with the nature of the discussion as it goes on in the church now. Do you see that the discussion really is still played out around those two kinds of freedom--community over against the individual?

McNicol:

The reason that I did invest a considerable amount of time in thinking about this debate anyway, is because I believe that issues at stake are burning issues within the church today. In answer to your question, even though the names have been changed and the issues may look different, I believe that we have these two perspectives or ways of looking at the world very much with us in the contemporary Christian community. It seems to me that at the heart of many of the so-called human potential movements today is the belief that somehow or other through some technique, whether it be by reading the latest manual on sexual activities or through some mind control device, we can achieve inner peace and can make our own way in society. Along with that, I think, comes a more strident form of saying that since I can be my own master, I am in complete control; I should have my own way; my personal rights should be totally expressed. We have this in the political realm. Those politicians can't do those things to me. We have it certainly in the various rights movements that are operative in society and push into the church: "I don't agree with the elders' decision, I have my own view about this." Or, "I will go my own way; I will give my own contribution to my own particular group if the church doesn't agree with my

interests,” and so forth.

By contrast, Paul views the world as coming together through suffering service; I tried to spell that out in our discussion. And so the point is, I think, we are only whole, not in the sense of doing our own thing, or when we feel we are not oppressed, but when we have opened up to helping others and have enjoyment and satisfaction in our cooperative relationships with others and a sense of growing together in the community. And so I see in this individual-versus-community thing, a paradigm of the tension within American society. We can't find a common base to live with one another. It's pulling us apart because we all demand our own rights.

I think Christianity has a lot to say here, but we can only come together on a common basis. I believe the cross is this proper foundation. But let me ask you, James, do you think there is anything in Paul's position on freedom that we may have learned originally from the Greeks? We often say, “Well, look, Paul went out with his very Jewish background and brought the gospel of Christ into this alien Greek environment, and had all of these problems. Every church we know he started in Greece ended up in division--Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth.” But was there anything “Greek” that Paul might have learned in his early background? We talk about the Judeo-Greek tradition feeding into Christianity: Can this meeting between East and West be of some help to us today?

Thompson:

One can't be sure here, but one or two things come to mind. In the first place, the word “freedom” is a very Greek word, and Paul is using a word that came out of that whole

heritage. It is not a word that you would find often, if at all, in the Old Testament, and I don't know what the Hebrew equivalent would be. But it is a Greek word that he is using. It's a word that he inherited from Tarsus and pretty well gave us that word--it's his word, and he uses it many times--freedom from and freedom for. Beyond that I can only speculate. I see some common ground with some of the Greeks because in the Athenian Democracy we find the origin of our whole insistence of human rights. Today we talk about inalienable rights in the Declaration of Independence. That whole concept of inalienable rights comes out of the Athenian Democracy. They did believe that rights are insured by common laws. Common laws gave you a common view of the world, so that you have meeting grounds. You talked about our society being split apart; you--as Paul--said that my whole view was splitting apart the community. There is a track record for that. Individual rights are in tension with collective rights and therefore they may get out of balance. But in the Greek heritage, in the Athenian Democracy, it was believed that the laws were divine, therefore, they weren't just unlimited rights.

Now, I think that the real tragedy that I see in our culture is that once I don't believe any of the laws have divine sanction, there is no limitation or hold placed on my insistence that I can do whatever I want to do. Now, let's say that the framers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution believed in some divine, inalienable rights. But these rights also limited one's insistence on doing his own thing. Paul, as you indicated, still had legislation--it wasn't a performance principle, but there were structures within which one had to live, so he would have agreed with some of the Greek heritage in that regard.

McNicol:

In that matter of Paul's outrage at the man living with his stepmother in Corinth--in old Jewish law an incident like that would have brought death to the person and even in the Greek law there were some negative rules and regulations, so there is a kind of common ground there. But somehow the Corinthians were missing the mark in that they saw themselves as totally free from all restrictions. As a Jew, Paul would have been shocked at people seeking freedom to such an extent they abandoned any kind of norm. I see here parallels with today's Hedonistic existence--the so-called Playboy philosophy. I think that we should always remember when we talk about Paul that one is seen as human only in relation to God who is holy. One must bring himself into proper perspective with this holy God. Only bound in proper relationship to God (based on faith) are we truly free.

CONTRIBUTORS

The contributors to this issue of the Faculty Bulletin are all members of the faculty at the Institute for Christian Studies.

Ash, Anthony Lee, B.S., Florida State University; M.A., Abilene Christian University; Ph.D., University of Southern California. Old Testament, Church History.

Crittenden, Don, B.A., David Lipscomb College; M.Div., Abilene Christian University. Practical Theology.

McNicol, Allan, B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Yale University; M.A., Ph.D., Vanderbilt University. New Testament, Intertestamental Literature.

Thompson, James W., B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Union Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Vanderbilt University. New Testament, Hellenistic Literature.

Watson, Paul, B.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., M.A., M.Ph., Ph.D., Yale University. Old Testament.

Weed, Michael R., B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Ph.D. Emory University. Ethics, Theology.